



CHESTER
CATHEDRAL

Christmas Day
25 December 2016
Cathedral BCP Eucharist, 11:45 am

Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 2:8-20

'Welcome, welcome!'

May I speak now in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Amen.

Welcome, welcome! For those who may not know, especially those of you visiting perhaps for the first time, I am relatively new here. But one distinctive feature about this beautiful cathedral I have found is the depth of welcome I have felt here, from people in all the different aspects of the cathedral – as I know you will have been welcomed this morning as you came into this place; the house of God, the very gate of heaven. I have been so humbled and feel a part of the family here already – thank you! As Christians we are part of the same family anyway – billions of us, through our common baptism and as we share in fellowship around God's table, bread and wine; we are all the same; all people are welcome, no matter who we are. God's love is free and constant, no matter what. And the many many people visiting this place I have spoken to, feel it too. When I have greeted people, welcomed them individually to concerts and events, many expect it, but some are surprised by it. People come here for many different reasons – to pray, to worship, to listen to concerts, to light candles and reflect on difficult circumstances, to discuss and

question, to experience something different. And many, especially around this Christmastide, have responded very positively to that welcome – whether it be following our major choral services, our public workshops or other events – they have told me to keep doing what we are doing; in welcoming all and everyone. It shows that all those different events have true meaning, real depth and worth, to different people in different ways. So, I will do as they ask and, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, I welcome you all this Christmas morning. The readings that we share this Christmas day morning highlight the welcome news, the Good news of the birth of Jesus; the Son of God born in human form to be part of humanity; uniquely human and divine at the same time, so God could share our humanity – our joys and our sufferings, as Jesus uniquely would go on to do. Because God loves us so much, he sent Jesus to us to be our Saviour – knowing that the welcome he would get would not always acknowledge him as the anointed one; rejection and persecution, like many in our world today, would be what Jesus suffered – for our sakes. But nonetheless, God’s love meant, then and now, that God would still do this for us, no matter how far away from the path of goodness humanity might stray; the door was opened for us to come back to a right path with God and with each other, following the footsteps of Jesus....something we can and must do in the everyday now, not just wait for the heavenly, eternal kingdom in the life to come.

Our first reading, taken from the prophecy of Isaiah hundreds of years before Jesus, speaks of the authenticity of Jesus as the Messiah, the one to bring Good News in a world so bereft of it – does that sound familiar, as we cast an eye over the news stories of today? The beautiful feet of him who announces peace in the middle of conflict and division. That the reign of God, Gods beautiful creation, is one meant to be of peace and harmony together; one that would make us sing and shout for joy; bringing cheerfulness and life afresh into each other’s lives. In its conception, the prophecy embodies a hymn-like language reminiscent of other prophets such as Micah, Nahum and Jeremiah. The scholars purport that there were possibly common bodies of traditional text that each drew from – and why not? God has been the source of life and prophecy since the start of creation, billions of years before the evolution of humanity. From the prophecy, we learn of God’s breaking into humanity, bringing peace,

guidance, comfort – in words which sing of the glory, words that the audience at the time would have been very familiar with in the forms of the psalms. The God of love bringing a welcome peace through victory over all difficulties and struggles for all people. News that should have been welcomed by everyone.

But what victory? Many people today, with the struggles of the everyday, with the warring and persecution around the world, with the struggle for life itself, might ask that valid question – victory where, for whom? Well, the gospel reading might help us to recognise firstly that Jesus himself came into our world in just such circumstances, understanding the plight of humanity, especially that of the lowly, the poor, the marginalised, the persecuted, the hungry and naked. No grand house or palace for his birth, no glorious breaking into humanity as a warrior or conqueror as those in Palestine would have wanted, to overthrow then the oppression and tyranny of Rome. No welcome for his parents, Mary and Joseph, as they are displaced themselves, having to travel to Bethlehem and finding there no welcome inn, even for Mary in her circumstances late into the pregnancy....until someone shows the love of God through their compassion and offers them a stable at least for the night. Action through human hands.

The shepherds are the first to hear the announcement of the birth of Jesus.....not the royalty or higher classes. In that region, at that time, that would have been unheard of – why not to the governors, the judiciary, the leaders and elders first? No, it was to a section of society who were already marginalised, the lowest part of society – something very much at the heart of the whole of Luke's writing. And we know what Jesus thinks of the 'lowest' place; all the way through his ministry, especially recounted in Luke, it is the outcast, the downtrodden, the persecuted that Jesus focuses on in his ministry, his care and compassion and love. Again and again, the outsider is welcomed – welcomed in God's eyes. They are included, loved, cared for – who are we to not do the same?

Some, particularly the sceptical, might argue that at this time of year, all we are doing is remembering; things that happened, following historical documents and archaeological findings, some two thousand years ago; things which have little relevance or bearing on our

modern world today. Is that true? As Christians, our faith, our common baptism, our discipleship as part of the one of body of Christ should cry out “NO, it is not”. Even for people of different faiths or none, the lessons are still there that we can and should learn from – even if we only believe it to be a story; but a story of one man who has shaped the life of this planet over two thousand years...that’s some influence; something that we can draw courage and strength from, no matter what our beliefs. We can still learn to care for one another, to find ways ourselves to look after the poor and needy, the oppressed, the marginalised; to fight against injustice and to settle for peace through dialogue and reconciliation rather than war and fighting. We can still learn from the story of Jesus, this one man, even if we don’t believe in his divinity or in the existence of God.

But as Christians, when we accept Jesus Christ as Saviour, welcome God into our lives to shape and fashion what we say and do; to guide and direct our lives through God’s own love – something miraculous occurs; something cheerful and exciting and fresh, time after time after time. Having Jesus in our lives does not make everything hunky dory and perfect overnight....but it makes a huge difference; it enhances our lives in ways that words can barely describe. It brings strength, courage and hope in the face of tremendous adversity, difficulty and loss. It challenges us to find time to pray, pray and pray again for the needs of others first; to find practical ways of helping others first. And every time, every action we take in Jesus name, Jesus is born afresh into our hearts and lives, to do that action, to change the lives of those around us, to encourage the making of peace and the care and compassion of those around us, as well as this precious earth that has been created. Each time, Jesus is incarnated, not now in earthly form, but within us... we become the true embodiment of Christ, with a natural will and desire to welcome others in Jesus’ name.

So, this Christmastide, may our prayer be you have a wonderful Christmas, being welcomed and welcoming each other; enjoying each other’s company and the fruits of God’s wonderful creation. But also let our prayer be that we continue to welcome all around us into this cathedral church or wherever we are; to reach out to let people know that all are welcome, no matter who they are; but that we also might welcome the Jesus Child daily into our lives, to change and

transform ourselves – so that all that we do and all that we say is indeed done....in Jesus' name. Merry Christmas!

Amen

Revd Dr Mike Kirby